PREVIEW

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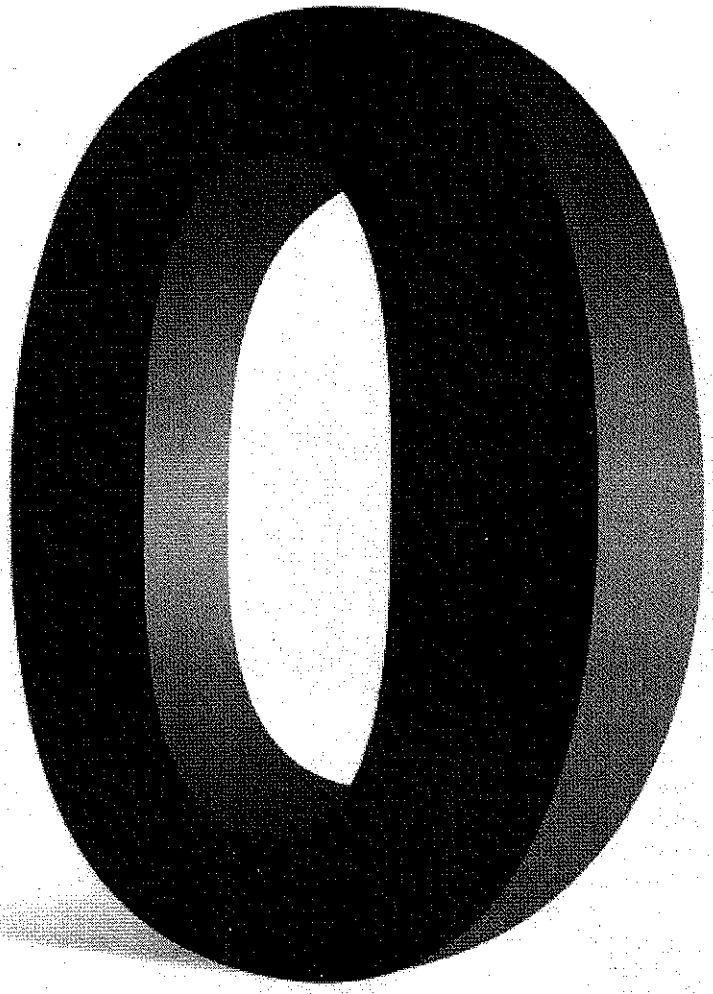

Zero Alternatives

BY THOMAS R. GUSKEY

Grading is one of a teacher's greatest challenges and most important professional responsibilities. However, few teachers have any formal training in grading methods and most teachers have limited knowledge about the effectiveness of various grading practices (Stiggins, 1993; Brookhart, 2004). As a consequence, when teachers develop their grading policies, they typically reflect back on what they experienced as students and use strategies that they perceived to be fair, reasonable, and equitable (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). In other words, most teachers do what was done to them.

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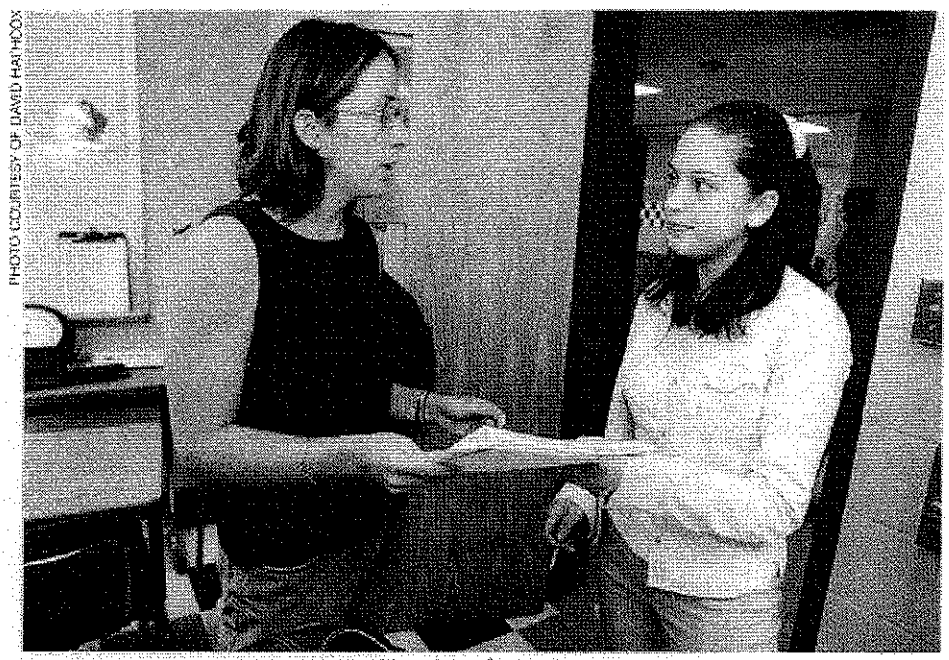

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Grades should be a way of communicating with students about achievement and working to help students improve.

According to Frisbie and Waltman (1992), when teachers are asked why they grade or what purpose grading serves, their responses generally fall into six broad categories:

- To communicate the achievement status of students to parents and others. Grading and reporting provide parents and guardians with information about students' progress and allow them to be involved in the educational process.
- To provide information students can use for self-evaluation. Grading and reporting give students information about the adequacy of their academic performance.
- To select, identify, or group students for specific educational paths or programs. High grades are typically required for entry into advanced classes or honors programs; low grades are often the first indicator of learning problems that can result in a student's placement into a special needs program. In addition, grades are used as a criterion for admission to colleges and universities.
- To provide incentives for students to learn. Although some may debate the idea, there is extensive evidence that grades and other reporting methods are important factors in determining the amount of effort that students put forth and how seriously students regard a learning task (Chastain, 1990; Cameron & Pierce, 1994, 1996).
- To evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs. Grade distributions are often compared to judge the effectiveness of new programs or instructional techniques.
- To provide evidence of a student's lack of effort or inability to accept responsibility for inappropriate behavior. Grades and other reporting devices are frequently used to document unsuitable behaviors on the part of students, and some teachers threaten students with poor grades in an effort to encourage more acceptable behaviors.

Although all of these may be legitimate, teachers seldom agree on which one is the most important. As a result, teachers often attempt to address *all* of these purposes with a single grading procedure or policy and usually end up achieving none of these purposes very well (Brookhart, 1991; Austin & McCann, 1992; Cross & Frary, 1996).

Nearly all teachers do agree, however, that the least important purpose is the sixth one: *To provide evidence of students' lack of effort or inability to accept responsibility for inappropriate behavior.* But few teachers recognize that many of their grading practices serve precisely this purpose. The most obvious example is when teachers assign zeros to students' work that is missed, neglected, or turned in late.

The Use of Zeros

Many teachers see zeros as their ultimate grading weapon. They use zeros in grading to punish students for not putting forth adequate effort or for failing to demonstrate appropriate responsibility. Students receive zeros for not meeting established deadlines, for misbehaving in class, or for refusing to heed the teacher's warnings (Canady & Hotchkiss, 1989; Stiggins & Duke, 1991). Some teachers recognize that assigning zeros punishes students academically for behavioral infractions; nevertheless, most believe that such punishment is justified and deserved.

Teachers also use zeros as instruments of control. In most instances, teachers have little direct influence over the privileges that students most value or the punishments they most fear. For example, teachers cannot restrict students' access to automobiles, computer games, or television. Nor can they limit students' social activities. But teachers do control grades, and grades can indirectly influence those privileges and punishments. A low grade often prompts parents to enforce punishments that are more persuasive and more compelling to students than those that a teacher can enforce. The threat of a zero—and the resulting low grade—allows teachers to impose their will on students who otherwise might be indifferent to a teacher's demands.

If the grade is to represent how well students have learned, mastered established learning standards, or achieved specified learning goals, then the practice of assigning zeros clearly misses the mark.

The problems associated with assigning zeros, however, are numerous and significant. First, a zero is seldom an accurate reflection of what a student has learned or is able to do (Raebeck, 1993). Obviously, if the grade is to represent how well students have learned, mastered established learning standards, or achieved specified learning goals, then the practice of assigning zeros clearly misses the mark.

Second, the effect of assigning zeros is greatly magnified if combined with the common practice of averaging scores to attain students' overall course grades. Students readily see that receiving a single zero leaves them little chance for success or a high grade because such an extreme score drastically skews the average. That is why in scoring such Olympic events as gymnastics or diving, the highest and lowest scores from judges are always eliminated. If they were not, one judge could control the entire competition simply by giving extreme scores. A single zero has more influence on an average than any other score in the group.

Third, and perhaps most important, no studies support the use of zeros or low grades as effective punishments. Instead of prompting greater effort, zeros and the low grades they yield more often cause students to withdraw from learning. To protect their self-images, many regard their low mark or grade as irrelevant and meaningless. Other students may blame themselves for the low grade but often feel helpless to make improvements (Selby & Murphy, 1992).

Alternatives to Assigning Zeros

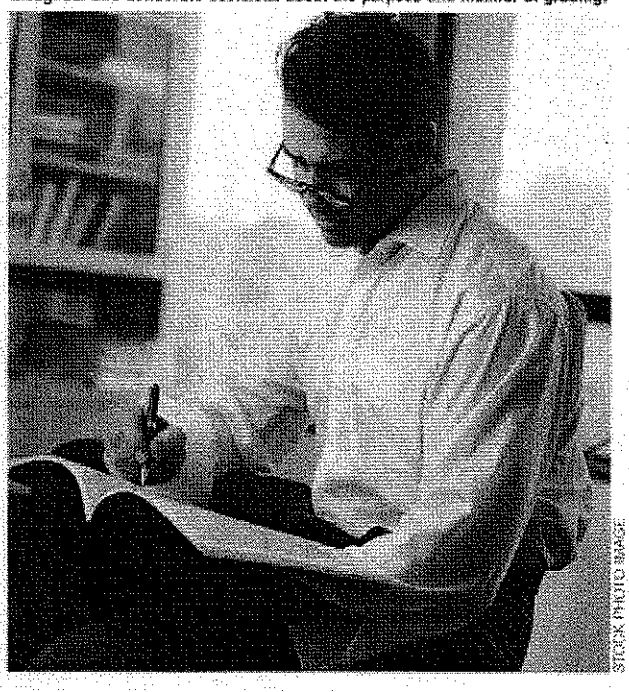
Frequently, teachers defend the practice of assigning zeros by arguing that they cannot give students credit for work that is incomplete or not turned in—and that is certainly true. But, considering these overwhelmingly negative effects, there are far better ways to motivate and encourage students to complete assignments in a timely manner than through the use of zeros.

Several schools have implemented the following alternatives and experienced great success.

Assign "I" or "Incomplete" grades. One alternative to zeros is to assign an "I" or "Incomplete" grade with explicit requirements for completing the work. The consequence of receiving an "I" is usually required attendance at a special study session after school or a special Saturday class where students work to complete neglected assignments to a satisfactory level. In other words, students are not let off the hook with a zero. Instead, they learn that they have specific responsibilities in school and that their actions have definite consequences. Not completing assigned work on time means that students must attend special after-school or Saturday sessions to complete the work—and no excuses are accepted. The consequence is direct, immediate, and academically sound.

Of course, implementing such a policy requires additional funding for the necessary support mechanisms. Teachers, volunteer parents, or older students must staff these after-school or Saturday sessions. In addition, the sessions require classroom space, and supplementary transportation may also be needed. Schools that implement such policies, however, generally find that they actually save money in the long run (E. Bernerich, personal communication, February 6, 1998). When students realize that their teachers are serious about school responsibilities, they also get serious about them. Because the consequences and the accompanying assistance of this policy are immediate, it

Developing a responsible grading system without the use of zeros requires thoughtful and deliberate decisions about the purpose and manner of grading.



Teachers must consider what message they want to communicate through grading, who the primary audience for the message is, and what the intended goal of the communication is.

helps students to remedy learning or behavioral difficulties before they become major problems. As a result, less time and fewer resources will be needed for major remediation efforts in the future. Further, this policy is far more beneficial and fairer to students than simply assigning zeros because it makes a grade a more accurate reflection of what students have learned.

Report behavioral aspects separately. Another alternative to assigning zeros is to report behavioral aspects of students' performance separately. For example, in many Canadian secondary schools, students receive multiple grades for each of their classes—both on the report card and on grade transcripts (Bailey & McTighe, 1996). A main "achievement" grade is based on evidence of students' academic performance. This achievement grade might include results from major examinations, scores from compositions or reports, or portfolio or project assessments. But on the basis of specific criteria, teachers offer separate grades or marks for homework, punctuality of assignments, class participation, effort, and so on. These aspects of students' performance are typically labeled *learning skills, work habits,* or *academic behaviors.*

Reporting multiple grades on different aspects of student performance may appear to create additional work for teachers. However, Canadian teachers who use this approach claim that it is easier and requires less work than assigning a single grade. These teachers gather the same evidence on student performance as other teachers. But by reporting multiple grades, they avoid the problems associated with combining many diverse sources of information into a single amalgamated grade. They are also spared from arguments about what "weight" to assign to each category or source of evidence. Most important, the grades they assign are more meaningful. Calculations of GPA and class rank, for example, more accurately reflect students' academic performance because they are based solely on "achievement" grades that are untainted by nonacademic, behavioral factors (Stiggins, 2001; Wiggins, 1996).

Change grading scales. One of the easiest and least objectionable ways to lessen the negative effects of zeros is to change grading scales. Schools using this approach shift from percentage grading scales where, for example, A = 90–100%, B = 80%–89%, C = 70%–79% and so on, to whole number scales where A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, and so on. In other words, although teachers can still assign zeros to student work that is missed, neglected, or turned in late, the effect of a zero is lessened because it is not so extreme. Although this approach ignores the problem of the grade not representing an accurate reflection of student learning, it does reduce the damage imposed by the extreme value of zero in a percentage grading system.

Abandoning the Zero

Teachers at all levels would undoubtedly prefer that students' motivation for learning be entirely intrinsic. Most recognize, however, that grades and other reporting methods are important factors in determining how much effort students put forth (Chastain, 1990; Cameron & Pierce, 1994). Unfortunately, this recognition leads some teachers to use grades as weapons to punish students, even though the practice has no educational value and, in the long run, adversely affects students, teachers, and the relationship they share.

Developing honest and fair grading policies should begin with candid discussions about the purpose of grading and reporting. Teachers must consider what message they want to communicate through grading, who the primary audience for the message is, and what the intended goal of the communication is. Once issues about purpose are resolved, decisions about the appropriateness of various grading policies—and the use of zeros—are much easier to address and resolve. If guided by reflections on the true purpose of grading, it is likely that teachers at all levels will abandon the use of zeros completely. PL

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GRADING AND REPORTING QUESTIONNAIRE

Name (Optional) _____ Grade Level _____

Years of Teaching Experience _____ Subject(s) _____

Directions: *Please read each question carefully, think about your response, and answer each as honestly as you can.*

1. What do you believe are the major reasons we use report cards and assign grades to students' work?

   a. _____
   b. _____

2. Ideally, what purposes do you believe report cards or grades should serve?

   a. _____
   b. _____

3. Although classes certainly differ, on average, what percent of the students in your classes receive the following grades:

   A ____ B ____ C ____ D ____ E or F ____

4. What would you consider an ideal distribution of grades (in percent) in your classes?

   A ____ B ____ C ____ D ____ E or F ____

5. The current grading system in many schools uses the following combination of letter grades, percentages, and/or categories:

A	100% - 90%	Excellent	Exceptional
B	89% - 80%	Good	Proficient
C	79% - 70%	Average	Basic
D	69% - 60%	Poor	Below Basic
E or F	59% -	Failing	

   If you could make any changes in this system, what would they be?

   a. _____
   _____
   b. _____
   _____

6. Is there an established, uniform grading policy in your school or district?

   Yes _____ No _____ I don't know _____

How well would you say you understand those policies?

Not at all Somewhat Very well

1 ---------- 2 ---------- 3 ---------- 4 ---------- 5

7. Grades and other reporting systems serve a variety of purposes. Based on your beliefs, rank order the following purposes from **1** (Most important) to **6** (Least important).

___ Communicate information to parents about students' achievement and performance in school
___ Provide information to students for self-evaluation
___ Select, identify, or group students for certain educational programs (Honor classes, etc.)
___ Provide incentives for students to learn
___ Document students' performance to evaluate the effectiveness of school programs
___ Provide evidence of students' lack of effort or inappropriate responsibility

8. Teachers use a variety of elements in determining students' grades. Among those listed below, please indicate those that you use and about what percent (%) each contributes to students' grades.

___ Major examinations
___ Major compositions
___ Unit tests
___ Class quizzes
___ Reports or projects
___ Student portfolios
___ Exhibits of students' work
___ Laboratory projects
___ Students' notebooks or journals
___ Classroom observations
___ Oral presentations
___ Homework completion
___ Homework quality
___ Class participation
___ Work habits and neatness
___ Effort put forth
___ Class attendance
___ Punctuality of assignments
___ Class behavior or attitude
___ Progress made

___ Other (Describe) _____
___ Other (Describe) _____

9. What are the most positive aspects of report cards and the process of assigning grades?

_____
_____
_____

10. What do you like least about report cards and the process of assigning grades?

_____
_____
_____